

Dedicated to:
Talya Sahara (*leBeit Nuriah*)

*Keep dancing my gypsy girl
in your rags of light...*

In memoriam:
Leonard Norman Cohen, CC GOQ
(September 21, 1934–November 7, 2016)

*You heard that secret chord
That pleased the Lord
Our minor falls, you played into a major lift
Redeeming the lost princess of Hallelujah!*

אליעזר בן ניסן הכהן ומאשא
(י"ד בכסלו, תרצ"ה—ו' במרחשון, תשע"ז)
ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	9
<i>Preface:</i> Shaul Magid	13
1. <i>Prelude:</i> New Skin for a Post-Secular <i>Circum/Fession</i>	17
2. On Exile as Redemption in (Canadian) Jewish Mysticism	26
3. From Darkness, a Love of All This: Seeking the Sacred in Post-Secular Song	61
4. Tangle of Matter & Ghost: Objective Spirit & Non-Dual Reality in Prayerful Poetry	83
5. A Question of Pure Consciousness in the Priestly Blessing of Love	103
6. <i>Amen</i> to American Agnosticism	124
7. Nothing as Whole as a Broken Middle <i>Matzah</i>	150
8. Falling with Our Angels, So Human	165
9. “An Appetite for Something Like Religion”: <i>Unbinding the Binding of Isaac, Jesus Christ & Joan of Arc through Zen</i>	179
10. Standing Where There Used to Be a Street: 9/11 Post-Secularism & Sacred Song	203
11. <i>Never Mind this Neuzeit, Here’s Kaddish:</i> Between the Nameless & the Name	218
12. <i>Codetta:</i> A Philosophy of Post-Secular Song in Light of <i>Piyyut</i> as a Cultural Lens	228
13. <i>Coda:</i> Burning Darker Beyond “You Want it Darker”	238
<i>Postface:</i> Elliot R. Wolfson	247
Notes	252
Bibliography	300
Index	325

Acknowledgements

This book wrote itself—*almost*. The inspiration for this book came in waves. In truth, it started with an archaeology of self and coming to the realization that my early attraction to Leonard Cohen’s song, “Who by Fire” changed the course of my path forever. Then through decades of *sprache-denken* with Elliot Wolfson—his deep listening, constant encouragement (including a generous invitation to deliver the first lecture from this book at his UC Santa Barbara Religious Studies Faculty colloquium) and his willingness to provide the postface of this book—I came to appreciate that my passion for Cohen’s lyrics was worthy of analysis like the mystical texts we studied together. Finally, my gratitude to George Mordecai for two decades of friendship in song that he continues to bring to life on the path. Thanks to Zachary Braiterman and David Koffman for their insightful critiques that lead to a more cohesiveness throughout the book. And special thanks to Shaul Magid, who has always been there to listen, reflect, and work through the thicket of thinking together, especially in his willingness to be the “midwife to thinking” for this truly strange book, which features his helpful preface a debt of thanks to Marty Cohen, editor of Merarah Matrix for lighting a spark!

I am also grateful to Congregation Beth Sholom, San Francisco, my new communal homestead, for supporting my ritual artistry and understanding the need for balance between the synagogue as a laboratory and scholarship retreat. A few Canadian ex-pats around

the homestead are always welcome, so my thanks to Angie Dalfen, as well as Jeremy and Ariella Toeman for keeping Montréal alive as one of my traveling homelands. The trilingual *Canadian Haggadah Canadienne* first came to my attention immediately after the Toeman family experimented with it on Passover 5775 (2015). Thanks to the Toeman family for rapidly lending me a family copy! Special thanks to Noa Storz-Andrews for lending her copy-editing skills to an early draft of this book as well as her insightful suggestions on structure and overall coherence of my argument as well.

Place and its *(dis)placement* have marked much of this book, so thanks to the following caring souls who nurtured me with the space and time of a writing retreat: Dara Nachmanoff and Glenn Chertan in Guerneville, California; David and Pauline Soffa in Napa, California; Albert and Ruth Lowenberg in Brichen, Ontario; Bruce and Esther Glazer in Toronto, Ontario.

Thanks to the following journals for permission to reprint previous articles published therein as chapters of this book:

“Leonard Cohen and the Tosher Rebbe: On Exile and Redemption in Canadian Jewish Mysticism.” *Canadian Jewish Studies*, Volume 20 (2012): 149-189.

“A Priestly Blessing of Love & the Question of Pure Consciousness in Judaism.” *Birkat Kohanim: Mesorah Matrix Series*, ed. Martin Cohen (New York: Mesorah Matrix Publications, 2016), 207-230.

“Never Mind this *Neuzeit*, here’s *Kaddish*: Between the Nameless & the Name.” *Kaddish: Mesorah Matrix Series*, ed. Martin Cohen (New York: Mesorah Matrix Publications, 2016), 419-430.

“Tangle of Matter and Ghost: Objective Spirit & Non-Dual Reality in the Prayerful Poetry of the Primordial Artist.” *מיש לאין*

From Something to Nothing: Jewish Mysticism in Contemporary Canadian Jewish Studies (Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi Gedenkschrift),

Acknowledgements

ed. Harry Fox and Daniel Maoz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, *forthcoming*).

“Falling with Our Angels, So Human: Zoharic Afterglow in Leonard Cohen.” *Future of Zohar in Honor of Daniel Matt’s Completion of Pritzker Translation of the Zohar* (Berkeley: UC Berkeley, Easton Hall, 2016).

Special thanks to Jennifer Toews at the Leonard Cohen Archive, housed at the Thomas Fischer Rare Book Room, University of Toronto, and to Leonard Cohen for permission to consult the vast archive and cite the following sources:

“A longing beyond/flesh & loneliness.” Hydra small notebook, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 122: Box 8b, n.d.

“We need eman-/cipation from/desire & no-desire.” Hydra small notebook, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 122: Box 8b, n.d.

“Untitled poem.” Hydra small notebook, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 122: Box 8b, Stratford, CT, August 19, 1959.

Graphic #21, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500: Box 73, December 23, 2003.

Graphic, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500, Box 74, January 3, 2004.

Graphic #70, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500: Box 74, 2003-2005.

Graphic #3, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500: Box 73, 2003-2005.

Graphic #14, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500, Box 64, n.d.

Graphic #3, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500: Box 73, Montreal, 2003.

Graphic #39, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500, Box 73, January 1, 2004.

Graphic #50, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500, Box 64, n.d.

Graphic #54, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500, Box 73, January 11, 2004.

Graphic #28, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500, Box 73, ca. December 2003.

Letter from Neal Donner, Cimarron scholar-in-residence,
to Leonard Cohen, Oct. 30, 1978, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS, 500:
Box 64, 1-2.

Lotus Sutra (1-14), *Heart Sutra* (15-16), *Dharani of Removing
Disaster*, *Dharani of the Great Compassionate One* (17-19), *Dai Segaki*
(20-21), *National Teacher Kozen Daito* (22-23), *The Four Great Vows* (24),
in *The Rinzai-Ji Daily Sutras* (n.d., n.p., included with *Mt. Baldy Zen
Center Newsletter*, 1975), Leonard Cohen Archive, Box 64, n.d.

“Untitled poem.” Written on three *Takanawa Prince Hotel Bar*
napkins, Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500, Box 64, March 20, 1996.

Letter from Kim Krull (Spokane, Washington) to *Buddhist America*,
Leonard Cohen Archive, MS 500: Box 64, 1992-1994.

Mount Baldy Zen Center Newsletter, Issue 7, Leonard Cohen Archive,
MS 500: Box 64, Winter 1997.

Last and most beloved, my gratitude to Elyssa, who continues
to inspire and encourage me on this path, within and beyond every word
of this book, dancing with the love of our life, Talya—*take this waltz,
it's for you!*

Preface

Baby boomers like to opine about the “prophets” of their generation, the seers and mystics who bend the countercultural arc toward themselves and their peers, the people whose words embody the spirit of collective angst. Dylan is the preferred choice here, outshining all the others with his explosive bursts of subversive creativity and force of will coming from the Rust Belt of America to the East Village. The musician Steve Earle once said that his mentor, Townes Van Zandt, was as good a songwriter as Dylan, perhaps even better, and as a child of the Texas heartland who never left Texas (except for a short stint in Nashville), he better represents the true Americana of the postwar era. But Townes was no prophet. He was a tragic Texas story of only partially fulfilled genius. And then there is Leonard Cohen, the urban bard from north of the border. What do we make of a man who looks more like a tailor than a rock star or folk singer?

Dylan and Van Zandt were songwriters and not really poets—separating their words from their songs does not always yield good poetry. Leonard Cohen began his journey as a poet and only later found song as a way to disseminate his words. He did not help create the folk revival; the folk revival helped create Leonard Cohen.

Cohen is no prophet—the very thought would be antithetical to Cohen—but as Aubrey Glazer suggests in his *Tangle of Matter and Ghost*, he is better described as a “pop-saint.” The difference between a saint and prophet merits a brief interlude. The prophet sees, the saint lives; the prophet is often angry, the saint is often melancholic. The prophet

proclaims, the saint teaches. The prophet is a critic of society; the saint, a self-critic. The prophet wants to change the world; the saint wants to change himself, and as Tolstoy taught us, “everyone wants to change the world, but no one wants to change themselves.” In our world, the prophet often takes acquired wealth and becomes the very thing prophesized against. Cohen retreats to a Buddhist monastery in Mt. Baldy, California, and maintains a modest home in Montreal, where he grew up. He loses his fortune to a corrupt manager. He starts with little and he goes back to zero. That might destroy a prophet, but not a saint.

Leonard Cohen starts out as a Jew and he remains a Jew. But what kind of Jew is he? Dylan runs as far from his Jewishness as he ran from Hibbing (who later finds his way back to Christianity and then somewhere in-between). Cohen never had a need to hide his Jewishness, to run from it. In fact, one could argue that Cohen’s life-work is precisely to ask the question “What is it to be Jewish?” But not in any parochial way. It is for him the same question as “What is it to be human?” Or, what is it to be anything at all? What is it to be at all? Glazer’s *Tangle of Matter and Ghost* takes us on a journey to find Leonard Cohen, to hear his voice anew, or perhaps to witness Leonard Cohen finding himself.

Along the way, Glazer takes us on numerous detours into the dense woodlands of the North Country. He asks us to consider the determinacy of place—of Montréal, of Canada, that country that gets swallowed up when we Americans say “North America” the same way Judaism is consumed when Christians say “Judeo-Christian tradition.” But let us consider Canada. Really consider it. Does Canadian Judaism have its own spirit, its own mysticism? Can Leonard Cohen be juxtaposed to the Tosher Rebbe, the Hasidic rebbe from the northern suburbs of Montreal? This is not a trivial comparison but a more subtle juxtaposition. What does it mean to live “up there,” to dwell in a bi- or trilingual society as opposed to the monolingual world in the U.S.? What is it like to live next door to the beast?

Like any saint, popular or classical, Cohen is a product of his time, a postwar, post-Holocaust “Jewish account” taking of the world. He just expresses it better than most.

To complete this task of finding Cohen or helping Cohen find himself, Glazer must deploy the arsenal of thinking about the fragility of the human condition, at this time, in this time: From the Zohar to the radical Hasidism of Mordecai Joseph Leiner, to Nietzsche, Adorno and Žižek, and of course, to the poets, Jew and Gentile, believers and heretics.

There is an inherent danger in such an enterprise. How does one avoid becoming dilettantish? How does one avoid the pitfalls of unsubstantiated comparison when one shatters the barriers that keep the scholar on the straight path? Glazer notes this in the beginning of his prelude. This book, he writes, will strike the reader as strange, maybe even *unheimlich*, that Freudian term that can indeed capture the travails of being Jewish, which Cohen certainly was, always. And of being human.

Glazer treats Cohen as a poet and reads him as a poet should be read. Glazer constructs an image, almost pictorial, through his verse. He explores his spiritual journey through the changing tenor of his poetic interests. This book is not a straight path, and in many ways, it contains no map or GPS. When you begin to read, you have begun the ride. In the end, I think Glazer finds Cohen’s Jewishness, but not through Judaism; he finds it in the crevasses of Cohen’s hope for the world that he shares with us through his words. Just as there is no Jewishness without the Jew, there is no poetry without a life. And Glazer situates Cohen’s life—in postwar Montréal, in a Buddhist Monastery, on a Greek island, as an itinerant—as a life in which home is carried with him. Like Daniel Boyarin’s claim about the Talmud in his book *A Travelling Homeland*, Cohen writes his home where he is. And therein lies his Jewishness!

Is Cohen a mystic? Not in any conventional sense. He was not an expert in any mystical tradition. His Buddhist practice was periodically monastic but seemingly quite normative for its time. He is a wholly (post)

secular seeker, a troubadour who looks for more, not out there, but inside. Glazer shows us that his search for God is his search for love, that love of God can only be found in love itself, and that love itself, teaches Cohen, is broken. Thus God must also be broken, if God is to *be* at all. Not in the Dylanesque sense of “everything is broken” and not quite in the Kafkean sense of utter hopelessness. Kafka was once asked, “Is there any hope?” to which he responded, “There is infinite hope. Just not for us.” One gets the sense that Cohen chooses otherwise. It seems that somewhere Cohen actually believes—it is just not quite clear in what. But maybe that does not matter. Maybe we mistakenly justify belief in its object rather than in the act of believing itself. If you don’t believe in *this*, then you don’t believe. So perhaps the very act of believing is a (post) secular mystical act. And here Cohen finds a place for himself and is a lighthouse for the many weary sailors in the night.

Tangle of Matter and Ghost is a truly original work by a scholar who is not afraid to write himself into his work, who is courageous enough to buck convention while retaining the discipline of scholarship. Cohen should be humbled that such an adept mind and spirit has taken him on as his subject. The portrait is complex, subtle, and imaginative. And *unheimlich*. As it should be.

Shaul Magid,

Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein,
Chair in Jewish Studies & Religious Studies,
Indiana University Bloomington

20th of Av, 5776

1

PRELUDE

New Skin for a Post-Secular *Circum/Fession*

To be a Jew and a philosopher in this post-secular moment is often portrayed as a process of thinking and writing in a manner attuned more to concealing than revealing the truth for fear of persecution.¹ But as Leonard Cohen—the bard behind this book—shows time again, navigating the *(dis)placement* of self requires a willingness to peel back the layers and expose the truth of one’s own journey toward redemptive homecoming. It is, as Cohen puts it, a “going home/without the costume/that I wore.”²

Through every movement of Cohen’s life, his songbook reveals the exoskeletons of his spiritual evolution. Yet, Cohen’s truth has an infectious rhythm of universal “truthiness” that dances us along on our own steps to self-discovery. That process of confronting the unraveling of meaning in the world is less alienating when embraced through song, and as I will argue, through the post-secular songbook of the bard in question—Leonard Cohen. Paradoxically, in the revelation of his truth we find ourselves.

Cohen’s lyrics are a symphony of circumscribed confessions or *circum/fessions*,³ a kind of self-justification that emerges during the process of writing and explaining ourselves. A *circum/fession* is both a confession and a circumcision. We cut a hole in our hearts as we spill our story onto

the page. Yet, like the Jewish ritual of circumcision, which represents the covenant between the male child and God on the eighth day, so too, in his eightieth year, Cohen continues peeling away at the layers of self to justify a more expansive bond with the Divine.

Tracing a small cluster of “days” in Cohen’s journey, from 1973 through 1977, we confront a series of courageous *circumfessions*. Through his lyrics, Cohen makes a series of cuts that bind: cutting himself off from his father’s Judaism, from his father’s Zionism; and later, from his own mask of masculinity as a Jewish Don Juan. That mask of machismo is stretched even further with the onset of the Yom Kippur War, when in October 6, 1973, Leonard takes leave of his family (who at the time lived on Hydra) the next day, flying from Athens to Tel Aviv to enlist in the Israel Defense Forces. As will become evident further on in this book, Cohen responds to the call while rebelling against the expectation of his father, an ardent Zionist. At the same time, though, he yearns to move beyond the path of his father to discover his own meaningful encounter with a Zionism and a Judaism unafraid of the world. This struggle manifests itself in 1974 on Cohen’s fourth album, called *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*,⁴ where Cohen asks his father in heaven and on earth to change the key to his spiritual identity his name. In “Lover Lover Lover,” Cohen sings:

I asked my father, I said, “Father change my name.” The one I’m using now it’s covered up with fear and filth and cowardice and shame. . . . He said: “I locked you in this body, I meant it as a kind of trial. You can use it for a weapon, or to make some woman smile.”

As a Jew, Cohen received his name on the eighth day of his life following the ritual cutting of his foreskin, or circumcision. Forty-some-odd years later, in search of a new name for his soul, Cohen writes one of his most moving books of prayerful poetry, *Book of Mercy*,⁵ as he follows the call of the prophet Jeremiah, whom he relished reading with

his grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Klonitzki-Kline, while living together for a short time in Montréal: “Circumcise yourselves to YHWH, and surrender the foreskins of your heart. . . .”⁶

Awaiting liberation is the name of the soul caged in the prison of the body. This classic gnostic motif, common in alchemy, also speaks in a deep and direct way as Cohen’s prophetic self rallies against his priestly lineage to envision “a new Jerusalem glowing.” This new name also prophesizes Cohen’s move beyond the shackles of being a “lady’s man” (using himself to “make a woman smile”), toward an equanimity between the masculine impulse and the feminine *eros*. Reflective of this tension is the cover art for *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, featuring the union of male and female and the four elements, adapted from the alchemical text *Rosearium Philosophorum* made popular by Carl Jung in his attempt to rebalance the primacy of the psyche within psychology.⁷ The soul, for Jung, is composed in its essence of the feminine *Anima* and the masculine *Animus*. This dichotomy represents the true self as opposed to the masks worn daily. Cohen follows Jung in the belief that the source of creativity remains lodged in the soul, awaiting liberation. The purpose of the *Rosearium Philosophorum*, then, is to enable:

the task of alchemical transmutation to unite these facets in a new harmony, into a perfected state of being where Body, Soul and Spirit mutually interpenetrate and work together. Man’s soul is thus the bridging element between the outer realm of the physical body and the spiritual world. This bridge must be built out of integrating the primal polarities of the soul, so that it becomes both a vehicle or vessel for the spirit and the master and moulder of the physical realm.⁸

The language of alchemy serves as Cohen’s palate as he attempts to paint a bridge for integrating the primal polarities of his own soul. The shift from alchemy to Rinzai Buddhism is not as stark as it may first seem. For it is but three years later, in 1977, following his first encounter with

Roshi in Japan, that Cohen then returns to record *Death of a Lady's Man*.⁹ At this moment within the arc of Cohen's songbook, we hear his longing to move beyond integration of the primal polarities of his own soul's masculine impulse that circumscribes the feminine, to die and be reborn in a more balanced way.

For Cohen, each album and newly recorded song marks a "day" in his spiritual development. With *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, Cohen illustrates how each of these "days" become woven into a new garment to shroud his soul. As the Zohar, the preeminent Jewish mystical text, teaches, birth and death are marked by a visitation from the "days" of one's life. When one is born, all the "days" of one's life emerge and as each day unfolds, the celestial "day" descends, awakening the possibility of living that day to its fullest. When one is about to die (to enter and experience higher dimensions) the soul is enveloped in a radiant garment, such a garment is woven out of one's virtuous days.¹⁰ Thus, the garment of one's soul is either fully woven of one's days lived virtuously or the garment is rent from one's days lived shamefully. It is no small coincidence that one traditionally begins study of the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, at forty years old. At forty years old, there are 14,600 days that stand before Cohen. With *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, Cohen seeks to accumulate the "days" lived with virtue. It is by virtue of any modicum of equanimity within *eros* that Cohen yearns to make his "days" count.¹¹

If, as I argue above, Cohen's lyrics dance us along on our own steps to self-discovery, then how has his songbook revealed my own journey as a Jewish philosopher, rabbi, musician, and artist? Within weeks of my arrival in the "American Jerusalem" known as San Francisco, for my first experiment with spiritual community I invoked the tantalizing "secret chord" of a broken *Hallelujah* over the Jewish New Year of *Rosh HaShannah* 5775. Albeit somewhat unconventional if not completely unorthodox for a rabbi to sing Leonard Cohen on the High Holidays with his/her community, I sought, nonetheless, to touch on something that the

remainder of the Hebrew, *piyyut*-laden service no longer manages to realize for most of those gathered—a direct heart-to-heart connection. No one in the standing-room-only, 700-plus seat synagogue of Congregation Beth Sholom could resist this *Hallelujah* moment. Everyone was present; no voice remained silent for the seductive chorus.

It is this question as to the possibility of prayer that Leonard Cohen's songbook is so adept at addressing in his testimony that: "There's a blaze of light/In every word/It doesn't matter which you heard/The holy or the broken *Hallelujah*."¹² It is only possible for the illumination to abide in "every word" if prayer itself becomes a *circum/fession* that the words of prayer themselves are the "holy or the broken." Prayer must begin from this place of brokenness, for as the bard sings: "There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in."¹³ Philosophers, like Jacques Derrida and Michal Govrin, argue further braking or interrupting the prayer is essential to opening space for conversation with the *Other* in that:

. . . a prayer should be interrupted. There is a moment of preparation; we have to be ready for the prayer. But, on the other side, when we pray, the prayer should not come to an end, because if the prayer is complete it is not prayer. So, the address of the other must remain interrupted. The interruption is the mode of our relation to the other. The prayer should remain interrupted. Not simply because someone has interrupted the prayer but because the meaning of the prayer remains undecidable. Must remain suspended . . . because it depends on the other. On the response of the other.¹⁴

To gain more of an appreciation of why such interruption and brokenness is so heartfelt for my journey, I share a brief sketch of how my prayer itself has become a *circum/fession* by way of Leonard Cohen's songbook. In the midst of my first leave-taking from the world of arts school to the study of architecture, I befriended a devout Catholic student, Bernardo Campos Pereira, hailing from Portugal. While studying

architecture together at the University of Waterloo, I found myself in constant dialogue with him over how our study of iconography was systematically effacing our devotional lives. The effect of this systematic de-programming of any remaining sense of religiosity was felt most strongly over the many all-nighters in studios when our survival through these long stretches was made possible with an elixir of music. There was no time to pray as we were so immersed in study; but study was not seen as a devotional mode of prayer—yet . . .

Bernardo and I inevitably found ourselves returning time and again near dawn to Leonard Cohen—usually, to those knowing incantations of: “Everybody knows that the naked man and woman/Are just a shining artifact of the past/Everybody knows the scene is dead/But there’s gonna be a meter on your bed/That will disclose/What everybody knows.”¹⁵ Of course it helped that as we were coming to terms with the role of such artifacts in our present creations, we were also studying Dante’s *La Divina Comedia*. Somehow, it was only in the company of this devout Catholic student that I was able to find my bearings, otherwise feeling completely adrift within the virulent secularization that was rampant in our studios at that time. So as it was through Cohen’s lyrics that I was invited to confront the deeper reality that: “Everybody knows the scene is dead,” which empowered me to eventually leave architecture behind and return to an archaeology of self. One of the first parts of this excavation in my archaeology of self would beckon me to confront my Canadian identity and begin studying French again.

Pursuing this “archaeology of self”¹⁶ was a challenge, given that I had given up the mandatory study of French in tenth grade to complete all my requisites in math and science required for architecture. Yet, in the language of my lost Canadian self I found the time necessary to perform an archaeology of self. I eventually became capable of reading Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire in their original tongue, while experimenting in film by joining the infamous Cinema Club at University of Toronto—the

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Приобрести книгу можно

в интернет-магазине

«Электронный универс»

e-Univers.ru